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Expanding access to non-public schools: a research and policy review

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Issue¹

Research on the academic and civic outcomes produced by non-public schools is complicated. On the one hand, studies of the “school effect” dating back to James Coleman’s 1982 analysis of public, independent, and Catholic high schools indicates that private schools often produce modestly better academic and civic outcomes than district schools, even after controlling for students’ demographics.² Furthermore, international research suggests that highly pluralistic school systems, in which the government funds and regulates but does not operate all schools, can create the conditions for both academic excellence and equity (OECD 2014). On the other hand, research on America’s scholarship programs shows uneven results, with one recent study (of Ohio’s voucher program) yielding “unambiguously negative” academic results, and at least one tax credit program’s benefiting predominantly middle-class rather than low-income families. What are we to make of these conflicting accounts? How do private-school access programs, such as tax credits and vouchers, affect student achievement and district budgets? Is there a way to ensure that they work towards excellence and equity rather than reinforce the socioeconomic status quo? How do other countries manage educational diversity? The bottom line: while the presence of diverse, state-supported private schools can be beneficial to students, there is nothing inevitable about their success.

Education tax credits allow individuals or corporations to reduce their tax liabilities by giving a limited amount of money to state-approved scholarship funds for (mostly low-income) children to attend private schools.³ The credit may not be used to fund a school attended by the donor’s children. Tax credit money is not considered public, because it never goes through state treasuries. The Supreme Court ruled tax credits to be constitutional in 2011 (*Arizona v. Winn*).

Vouchers are public school funds that parents may use to send their children to private schools. Most voucher programs are means-tested or school-tested—that is, only students whose families fall below a certain income level or who have attended “failing” schools are allowed to use them. The Supreme

¹ Elements of this commentary were developed with the partnership of Chiefs for Change. The Institute is grateful to Chiefs for Change for permission to use this material.

² For example, see James Coleman and Anthony Bryk on Catholic high schools (Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982), (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993); William Jeynes on the religious school effect (Jeynes 2007); the Cardus studies of graduates of different school sectors (Pennings 2011), (Pennings 2014); David Campbell and Patrick Wolf on the civic outcomes of non-public schools (D. Campbell 2008), (Wolf 2007); Charles Glenn’s summary of international studies (C. Glenn 2005).

³ Not all tax credit programs focus upon private school scholarships exclusively; many allow funds to flow to public schools as well.

Court ruled that vouchers are constitutional from a federal perspective in 2002 (*Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*).

Education Savings Accounts provide state funds that enable eligible students to attend private schools. Arizona permits parents to use the funds, additionally, to purchase online courses and instructional materials and to save for higher education. The funds are delivered via restricted-use debit cards.⁴ ESAs have not been challenged in the highest court as of the time of writing.

Such programs are relatively new in the United States context; the majority of the country's 50 choice programs have been created in the last five years (Shakeel, Wolf, and Anderson 2016). Consequently, the research record on their outcomes is modest and contested. The effects of scaling up such programs in the United States are simply unknown.

Research on Private-School Access Programs in the United States

The relative novelty of publicly funded scholarship programs is only one factor that makes conclusive statements difficult; the programs themselves vary widely in their per-capita funding, eligibility requirements, grade-levels of students, and accountability protocols. And it's difficult to generalize across studies, which often explore different outcomes, from test scores and high-school graduation rates to college enrollment. Finally, the scholarship is contested – often along ideological lines - with neither side trusting the other's work (Smith 2017).

Bearing all these qualifications in mind, however, a careful review of the research finds that private-school access programs, on average, have neutral or modestly positive academic effects for the students who use them; neutral to modestly positive academic effects on the students who remain in the public schools; and neutral to positive effects upon districts' budgets – at least, in the short term. The research also finds negative academic results from several specific programs.

Effects on Student Achievement and Attainment

Here are a few strongly researched examples of a longer list of studies that show neutral or positive effects on student achievement and attainment:

- *Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (enacted 1990). One randomized controlled study found statistically significant, positive effects in both reading and math scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills of elementary and middle school voucher-users, as compared to those who applied for vouchers and did not receive them and also to those who received vouchers but did not use them. The effect ranged in percentile point gains of 4.85 in reading to 6.81 in math after 3 or 4 years. The positive effects generally increased the longer the students participated in the program, and math increased more substantially than reading (Greene, Peterson, and Du 1999).⁵

⁴ For more information, see (National Conference of State Legislators 2016).

⁵ The positive outcomes are striking because, as the authors note, they occurred during the sub-optimal early years of Milwaukee's program, during which time the program disallowed religious-school participation (i.e., 90% of private

- *New York School Choice Scholarships Foundation* (1997-2000). This privately funded program offered low-income students in grades 1-4 (or just entering kindergarten) scholarships to attend non-public schools for up to four years. 20,000 children applied for 1,300 spaces, thus enabling a randomized control trial of outcomes.
 - In Year 2 of the program (1999-2000), a randomized controlled analysis by Mathematica and Harvard found no effect of being offered a scholarship, and using the scholarship, upon White and Latino students' test scores, but a statistically significant, positive effect upon African American students that amounted to a .23 effect size, or roughly a third of a school year's worth of learning (Myers et al. 2000).
 - A 2012 study examined the college-going behavior of the scholarship recipients by matching 99.1% of the original scholarship-application information with college-enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse. The research team found no generalized impacts of a scholarship offer upon college enrollment, but a statistically significant, positive effect upon African American scholarship applicants: a scholarship offer "increased the overall (part-time and full-time) enrollment rate of African Americans by 7.1 percentage points, an increase of 20 percent. If the offered scholarship was actually *used*, the impact on African American college enrollment is estimated to be 8.7 percentage points, a 24 percent increase" (Chingos et al. 2012).
- *D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program* (enacted 2004). In 2004, Congress appropriated \$26 million for Washington, D.C.'s public and charter schools, and allocated \$13 million to scholarships to enable low-income students in low-quality public schools to attend private schools. The vouchers were worth approximately \$7,500 each and enabled approximately 1,000 students to begin the program each year. The first two years (Cohorts 1 and 2) included 5,818 applicants of whom 4,047 were eligible (according to the means test established by Congress); 2,454 received scholarships; and 1,824 used them. The lottery conditions enabled a randomized control trial. The D.C. analysis compares the effect of receiving and using a scholarship versus receiving and not using the scholarship.
 - At the end of four years of participation, students who won and used the scholarships saw statistically significant gains in reading test scores on the Stanford Achievement Test 9 that equaled roughly three months of additional learning above their peers who received, but did not use, the scholarship. There was no statistically significant change in their math test scores.
 - The study also investigated the effect of voucher offers and voucher use upon high school graduation. Five hundred (500) students would have graduated from high school by the end of four years. Students who were offered a scholarship had a higher probability of graduating from high school by 12 percentage points (82% vs. 70%). Students who were offered and *used* a scholarship were more likely to graduate from high school by 21 percentage points (Wolf et al. 2013).
- A *recent meta-analysis* (2016) surveyed 9,000 randomized control trials of school choice programs in other countries and in the United States, narrowing its focus to 19 RCT studies of 11 choice programs that had investigated math and language scores. The programs in the United States (in Toledo, Dayton, NYC, Washington, D.C., Charlotte, Milwaukee, and

schools in the area) and thus unintentionally consigned voucher students to schools that were often fiscally and operationally constrained.

Louisiana) showed null reading effects and positive, but modest math effects on test scores: 0.07 standard deviations, or approximately two months' worth of learning, upon standardized math test scores for students who used a scholarship program to attend private schools over their peers who received, but did not use, such a mechanism (Shakeel, Wolf, and Anderson 2016).⁶

At the same time, several programs have produced quite negative effects on student achievement. Two examples:

- *Ohio's Educational Choice Program* (enacted in 2005). A recent study examined the results of voucher use upon eligible students who used a voucher to attend private schools, using individual student data from school years 2003-04 through 2012-13. The research team used a propensity-score matching method rather than a randomized experiment (this approach was needed since the Ohio program did not use a lottery), found voucher use to have had an “unambiguously negative” effect of participation upon voucher users' state-test scores compared to students' scores who were eligible, but did not use, a voucher. The negative effect ranged from 9 to 18 percentage points in reading and 17 to 25 percentage points in math (D. Figlio and Karbownik 2016).
- *The Louisiana Scholarship Program* (enacted in 2012). A randomized controlled study⁷ of the program during its first two years of operation showed that voucher users (659 students) lost approximately 34% of a standard deviation on the state's math tests (approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of learning in a given school year) after two years of attendance in their first-choice private school – an “unprecedented negative evaluation,” according to the scholars – compared to those who applied for, but did not receive, a voucher (1,004 students). The impact upon the state's ELA test scores was also negative but statistically insignificant (Mills and Wolf 2016).⁸

In sum, publicly funded scholarship programs in the United States are varied and produce uneven results. As with any educational intervention, program design and implementation have direct bearing upon the outcomes, and the enabling laws differ in significant ways that influence the students served and the academic consequences.

Effects on Non-Academic Outcomes

⁶ As in the cases above, this represents the most cautious estimate of program effect.

⁷ The authors were able to mimic an RCT setting because of over-enrollment in the voucher program; when there were more applicants than seats at the school, students were given a voucher randomly. Therefore, over-enrollment allows the authors to restrict their study to students who were eligible and wanted to obtain vouchers for the same schools, whether they received them or not.

⁸ Superintendent of Louisiana, John White, points to state-test improvement in subsequent years as evidence of the program's longer-term positive impact: “Conventional metrics collected by the Louisiana Department of Education show that performance among the students in Louisiana's voucher program has considerably improved since the first year. The gap in basic proficiency on state tests between participating private schools and public schools statewide, for example, has closed from 27 percentage points in 2013 to 18 points in 2015. Were Louisiana's private school voucher program considered a school system for purposes of analysis, it would have ranked number 9 out of 71 districts across the state in 2015 for annual improvement in the district performance score system—inclusive of test score performance, graduation rates, and other outcome metrics—used by the state to gauge overall district performance” (Dreilinger 2015), (White 2016).

Is it right to limit school-sector comparisons to test scores and graduation rates? Yes and no. For accountability and comparability purposes, a focus on math and ELA test scores is necessary to ensure the provision of an adequate education. Such measures do not exhaust the outcomes that matter to parents and students, however. For instance, the first study of New York City's private scholarship program, described above, found differences in school climate as reported by parents. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the parents of students who received and used the scholarship reported that "fighting was a serious problem" in their child's school, compared with 70% of parents of students who received but did not use the scholarship and remained in public schools; sixty-four percent (64%) of the private-school parents reported their children's homework load as more than an hour a day compared to 41% of public-school parents; private-school parents were four times more satisfied with their schools than their public-school peers.

Still other outcomes might be important to parents and policymakers, citizenship formation not least. Political scientists often refer to four common measures of citizenship behavior: community service, civic skills, political knowledge, and political tolerance (D. Campbell 2008). These measures reflect a combination of knowledge about the democratic process, democratic capacities such as analyzing legislation and writing letters, and civic attachment, i.e., what are my obligations to *this* community and *this* nation? This burden does not rest upon schools alone, of course. Citizenship formation comes via many sources - the family, the media, and social networks. But schools represent many students' first and most sustained experience with civic institutions, and research finds that they exert an independent effect upon civic outcomes (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993), (Mulligan 2006), (Jeynes 2012). As the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) put it, schools can "help students develop relevant knowledge and understanding, and form positive attitudes toward being a citizen [of the nation] and participat[e] in activities related to civic and citizenship education (Schulz et al. 2010)."

The school effect upon citizenship is less well researched than that upon academic achievement. There are some indications of a private school advantage above and beyond family background. In 2007, Patrick Wolf analyzed 21 quantitative studies on the effects of private and public schools on seven civic virtues: the four enumerated above (community service, civic skills, political knowledge, and political tolerance) plus social capital ("the extent to which a person is networked within their community"), political participation (voting, writing government representatives), and patriotism ("a visceral positive connection to one's country and respect for its national symbols and rituals"). Taken together, the study yielded 59 discrete findings that connected particular school types with civic outcomes and that separated school effect from family background. The vast majority of the findings (56 out of 59) suggested a neutral-to-positive effect of non-public schools on civic outcomes (Wolf 2007). Another lens: in February 2017, the Cardus Religious Schools Initiative at Notre Dame released a report which showed long-term positive effects of religious and independent private schooling on adult philanthropy and volunteer activity (Sikkink and Schwartz 2017).⁹

⁹ This team has conducted two surveys of the graduates at ages 24 - 39 of public, Protestant, and Catholic schools, and reported on outcomes that included educational attainment, volunteering habits, the number of close friends who differ by race and/or religion, and political involvement (Pennings 2011), (Pennings 2014). They found substantial variation in outcomes.

Are there any red flags from the research? Yes. Three of the 59 findings in Wolf's meta-analysis were negative: "[E]vangelical Protestant schools reduce political tolerance, secular private schools decrease voluntarism, and private schooling of any sort may diminish a particularly passionate form of patriotism" (Wolf 2007). And although David Campbell's 2008 study found a generally positive effect of private schooling on citizenship behaviors, it did indicate a negative effect of Protestant schools upon the measure of political tolerance (D. Campbell 2008). One more negative indicator that may be of interest: Cardus's 2014 survey of graduates of different school sectors found a low level of social trust amongst former home-schoolers (Pennings 2014). The relationship between social trust and civic engagement is uncertain, but this area surely merits further research, as the number of students who are home schooled roughly equals the number of students who attend charter schools.

But in the main, at least in civic outcomes, research suggests a private-school advantage; as one political scientist wrote in 2012, "[i]t is time to move beyond the question of whether public or private schools are 'better' at civic education. . . . [E]mpirical evidence makes clear that private schooling is not a detriment to civic education. In many cases, private schools surpass their public counterparts." The more pertinent question, he adds, is "*why* do schools differ in the civic education they offer" (D. Campbell 2012). What *are* the precise mechanisms by which schools of any type foster citizenship behavior? Scholars disagree about which mechanisms matter most, but researchers believe that all of these have a role: social-capital creation (Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982), high expectations and rigorous academic programs (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993) classroom environments that support deliberation and debate (D. E. Campbell 2008), strong normative school cultures (Seider 2012), and school structures that engage parents (Mulligan 2006). Such factors may be more likely to exist in private or charter schools, but there is no inherent reason why they should not occur in state-run schools as well.

Beyond citizenship behaviors, we lack good data about specific virtues that schools may seek to inculcate which may have meaning only within certain subcultures, such as Montessori's "valorization" or Evangelical Protestant's notion of "discipleship." There are thus multiple reasons to support ongoing research into the factors that drive positive non-academic outcomes alongside test scores and high-school graduation rates.

Fiscal and academic effects upon state budgets and district schools

What happens to the students who remain in district schools, after their peers take up vouchers and tax credits? And what about district and state budgets: do they take a hit from scholarship programs? While several studies show neutral to positive effects on state budgets and district schools, the research base is scant and suggestive rather than definitive.

- *State budgets.* Most choice programs cap scholarship amounts at or below the state's allocated amount for students in the relevant subgroup, thus having in general a neutral to positive effect on state education budgets (Cunningham 2013). One fiscal analysis (2007) concluded, "Every existing school choice program is at least fiscally neutral, and most produce a substantial savings" (Aud 2007). As an example, the Florida legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability found a net savings from the state's

Opportunity Tax Credit Scholarship Program: “We estimate that in Fiscal Year 2007-08, taxpayers saved \$1.49 in state education funding for every dollar loss in corporate income tax revenue due to credits for scholarship contributions. Expanding the cap on tax credits would produce additional savings if there is sufficient demand for the scholarships” (Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability 2008).¹⁰

- *District budgets.* The reduction in district budgets from state funding due to choice programs is usually identical to the reduction due to students’ moving out of state or to another public school district. School districts retain all of the local and some of the federal funding, however, when enrollment drops from either cause (Lueken 2016).¹¹ A 2012 analysis estimates the impact of choice programs upon district finance by separating fixed costs,¹² which represent 36% of the average district budget, from variable costs,¹³ which represent 64%. Using data from two large and two small districts, the study found that districts would not be penalized financially if dollar amounts that equaled less than the variable costs (i.e., up to 64% of the district budget) were allowed to follow students to non-public schools (Scafidi 2012).¹⁴
- *District academic outcomes.* As with fiscal effects, the academic effect upon district schools has not been studied in depth. However, the Ohio study above found that, although the effect of using a voucher was academically negative for voucher-users the students who remained in public schools saw their test scores improve (D. Figlio and Karbownik 2016). Another analysis used economic modeling to predict that universal vouchers are likely to have negative academic effects upon district schools, whereas targeted vouchers, i.e., access is contingent upon income and/or ability, are likely to have positive effects upon district schools (Akyol 2016). This theoretical scenario is supported by an analysis of the effects of Florida’s corporate tax credit program upon eligible, low-income students whose zoned, low-performing public schools were geographically proximate to a number of private-school options under the program’s parameters. The study found a positive academic effect upon the state test scores of students who left and students who stayed in the district schools. The study does not establish causation: its authors consider that the threat of losing Title I dollars, a landscape with numerous private-choice options, and the fact that students who left public schools had histories of lower performance on test scores, may have driven the positive effects

¹⁰ Additional audits from the Milton & Rose Friedman Foundation show substantial cost savings (Spalding 2014), (Lueken 2016). As was Aud’s, these reviews were commissioned by a think tank with an ideological commitment to the school-choice movement.

¹¹ Title I funding is meant to follow low-income students to non-public schools. The process for allocating such funding, however, is onerous, and very few schools have the administrative staff to negotiate with the district in this regard (Gordon 2017).

¹² The following are considered fixed costs: capital expenditures, interest, general administration, school administration, operations and maintenance, transportation, and other support services.

¹³ The following are considered variable costs: teachers’ salaries, instructional costs, nonacademic student supports, instructional staff support, materials, and food service.

¹⁴ Scafidi’s analysis was funded by the Milton & Rose Friedman Foundation, which has an ideological commitment to the school-choice movement. This is not to cast doubts upon the analysis but merely to illustrate the bias of its funders.

for district students (D. Figlio and Hart 2014).¹⁵ Another factor may be that “instructional spending per student has consistently gone up in all affected [by school-choice] public school districts and states” (Aud 2007).

As a whole, the research record on the impact of private-school choice programs upon districts’ academic performance and fiscal balance is thin. The long-term fiscal effects upon districts are likely to be negative. Eventually, high-choice states will reduce their allocations to districts, because the districts will have fewer students to educate. Should this likely long-term outcome trump all other concerns? It depends upon one’s interpretive framework, as the final section of this memo explains.

Research on Education Savings Accounts

Five states¹⁶ have signed education savings accounts into law, and 18 state legislatures considered ESA bills in 2016 (Gibbons 2016). Nevada’s legislature passed a universal ESA in 2015 that the state Supreme Court upheld in 2016, although the Court required the funding mechanism to be re-drawn before the program could be put into effect (Bedrick 2016).¹⁷ In September 2016, Sen. John McCain’s *Native American Education Opportunity Act* passed the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs which, if made into law, would create federal ESAs for children who currently attend the Bureau of Indian Education schools (Chavez and Caulfield 2016). In April 2017, Arizona’s legislature pass an ESA program that has universal eligibility and will be extended to at least 5,500 new students each year (Goldstein 2017). There have been no robust studies of ESA program effects to date.¹⁸

International Research

There are few international analogs to American-style vouchers, because most long-established democracies fund diverse schools as a matter of principle. They also superintend these schools’ academic performance at a level many American reformers might find uncomfortable. The Netherlands supports 36 types of schools on equal footing; the province of Alberta funds Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Inuit and even homeschooling (C. Glenn 2011), (McEwen 1995), (C. L. Glenn, Groof, and Candal 2012). The same is true in England, Norway, France, Australia, and Singapore, and many other countries.

The majority of international studies find that private schools often produce positive student gains even after controlling for family background (C. Glenn 2005), (Donnelly 2017). Perhaps more importantly, research also finds that the presence of diverse schools seems to have a positive effect upon all schools. For example:

¹⁵ This research took place in an urban school district where the threat of Title I funding loss was real, and the number of possible private school placements large.

¹⁶ Arizona (2011), Florida (2014), and Tennessee, Mississippi, and Nevada (2015).

¹⁷ The court did require the legislature to alter the program’s funding mechanism, which it is poised to do.

¹⁸ One study (Butcher and Burke 2016) analyzed the Arizona Department of Education’s data on the state’s program (enacted in 2011) and found that 83% of the ESA dollars go to private school tuition, the remainder to educational therapy, tutoring, and instructional materials.

- Sweden allowed municipalities to pluralize through a per-capita funding mechanism in 1992. In some districts, as many as 45 % of the students attend non-public schools. Twenty years on, these reforms seem to have boosted the performance schools of all types on national exams taken by all students at the conclusion of 9th grade within a heavily plural district. The statistically significant positive results were not evidence until ten years after the reforms, which the authors attribute to the rising number of private schools that followed the reforms (Böhlmark and Lindahl 2012).¹⁹ A separate analysis of the effects of this reform on national exams results, taken by all students at the conclusion of 9th grade, showed small positive effects (Wondratschek, Edmark, and Frölich 2013).
- In the Netherlands, “the educational performance [on national exams] of all schools is enhanced in areas where they coexist in a ‘balance of power’ and no single type of school dominates the others” (Dijkstra, Dronkers, and Karsten 2004).

Several developing nations have experimented with vouchers, and research indicates mostly positive program effects. However, because these countries’ public education systems tend to be lower performing than ours, and the students who use vouchers live in more dire economic circumstances than ours, the positive findings cannot be directly extrapolated to the United States. Two examples:

- Chile was the first country to implement vouchers (1981). Its initial program allowed schools to take students’ academic record into consideration, and to interview parents, during the admission process. Both measures correlate to socioeconomic status. Therefore, Chile’s system produced gains for students who were already advantaged. In 1994, Chile’s government struck down all selection processes in the lower grades and parent interviews in the upper grades. The country’s voucher program, which now educates 39% of Chile’s students, no longer privileges the middle class. Chile outperforms most of its neighboring countries on the OECD’s PISA exams. A likely factor of this improved performance is the number of private schools that exist within high performing networks of, on average, five schools. Similar to Charter Management Organizations in the United States, students in such the networks seem to benefit from economies of scale that produce a positive effect on national test scores vis-a-vis non-networked private schools and municipal schools - although the latter is less certain:
 - “After controlling for student and peer attributes and for selection bias, we still find a substantial positive and statistically significant effect of attending a network school on student achievement. Students at network schools score 19 percent and 25 percent of a standard deviation higher than students at stand-alone schools in Spanish language and math, respectively. We also find that students at municipal schools do significantly worse than students at stand-alone schools on achievement tests (19 percent and 16 percent of a standard deviation in Spanish language and math, respectively), although, as discussed above, we are less confident in these results because of the difficulties of accounting for the selection of students into and by private schools” (Elacqua, Contreras, and Salazar 2008).

¹⁹ Böhlmark and Lindahl evaluated the program’s effect in relative terms using regional-level TIMSS data. Sweden’s absolute academic proficiency has declined since the landmark changes of 1992.

- The largest voucher program to date was enacted in Colombia in 1991.
 - Since 1991, the program has provided more than 125,000 very low-income pupils with vouchers to attend private secondary schools.
 - Two quasi-experimental studies found statistically significant, positive program effects on some academic and non-academic indicators: three years after the lottery, students who won vouchers were more likely to have completed 8th grade; earn test scores that were higher by .2 standard deviations (or roughly six months' of schooling); and less likely to cohabitate or marry during adolescence than those who did not win the lottery (Angrist et al. 2002). Seven years after winning the lottery, students were 15% – 20% more likely to have graduated from high school than those who did not win the lottery (Angrist, Bettinger, and Kremer 2006).

There are programmatic nuances to be found across all of these countries, just as there are within the United States; I explore many of them in my book on educational pluralism (Berner 2016). My conclusion is that under some specific circumstances, a civil-society approach to education can be of academic and civic benefit to students.

Policy Guidance

Twenty-five states plus Washington, D.C., support at least one mechanism that expands access to private schools (Freundewey et al. 2016). The laws that govern scholarship programs vary considerably, and the merits of each depend upon one's perspective.²⁰ From a libertarian perspective, for instance, government accountability structures and economic means-testing are often viewed in negative terms ("TPPF releases 'Avoiding Government Regulation: Why Parental School Choice Is Possible Without Destructive Control of Private Schools'" 2014). On the other hand, policymakers who want scholarship programs to improve academic outcomes without simultaneously reinforcing socioeconomic stratification will need to scale up programs slowly, with the least advantaged students benefiting first. The guidelines below make equity under this definition, more likely.

- *Adequate funding of scholarships.*²¹ The dollar value of scholarships allowed by law influences which students are able to use them and which private schools they select. Low-income families are more likely to use scholarships when there is no gap between the scholarship's dollar amount and the tuition at local private schools. In a nationally representative sample of participants in the Children's Scholarship Fund,²² only one third of the students who had been offered a scholarship, took it. Having to pay 25% or more of the school tuition was a causal factor in the low rate of acceptance. Not only income levels but also credit constraints limit participation; because low-income borrowers may be deemed high-risk, private lenders hesitate to lend at conventional rates (Howell et al. 2002).

²⁰ The structure of a scholarship program is influenced by state constitutional constraints. The Institute for Justice, which has been at the forefront of school-choice legal defense, has produced a state-by-state guide (Komer 2016).

²¹ The value of scholarship funding varies from \$5,000 in Louisiana to \$7,500 in Washington, D.C. to \$1900 in Maryland (Shakeel, Wolf, and Anderson 2016) (Mills and Wolf 2016) (Wolf et al. 2013).

²² The Children's Scholarship Fund is one of the nation's largest private-scholarship programs for low-income students in grades K-8 (<http://www.scholarshipfund.org/about/history/>).

- *High levels of accountability and transparency.* The majority of voucher programs and some tax credit programs require recipients to take nationally normed exams and/or state summative exams (Frendewey et al. 2016).²³ States might also require each funded school to make basic facts public, including its curriculum, textbooks/materials, proficiency targets, and students' academic outcomes. Louisiana, for example, publishes the average voucher-recipient scores on state assessments, the rates at which scholarship students complete the highest grade-level offered by the participating school, and parental satisfaction surveys (Cunningham 2013). Some international school systems go even further. The UK requires funded schools to post on their websites a long list of details about the school culture and results, including:
 - On curriculum, “the content of your school curriculum in each academic year for every subject; the names of any phonics or reading schemes you’re using in [early years]; a list of the courses available to pupils [in senior high]; how parents or other members of the public can find out more about the curriculum your school is following.”
 - On the “per pupil premium” which is allocated for economically and socially disadvantaged students, for the current year, “your school’s pupil premium grant allocation amount; a summary of the main barriers to educational achievement faced by eligible pupils at the school; how you’ll spend the pupil premium to address those barriers and the reasons for that approach; how you’ll measure the impact of the pupil premium; the date of the next review of the school’s pupil premium strategy.” For the previous academic year, “how you spent the pupil premium allocation and [its] impact on eligible and other pupils.”
 - On academic results, not only the nationally required test results but also “the student ‘destinations’ (the percentage of students who continue in education or training, or move on to employment at the end of 16 to 19 study)” (Ministry of Education n/d).
- *Eligibility that prioritizes at-risk groups.* Some program designs will disproportionately benefit families with means (see below). While universal school choice remains a goal for some education reformers in some states (Nevada’s Education Savings Account is universal, as is Arizona’s recent legislation), means-testing insures that low-income and other disadvantaged students benefit first. A few examples:
 - *Arizona.* Arizona’s initial tax credit program (1997) benefited middle-income rather than low-income students, because the program did not restrict students’ eligibility (Wilson 2000), (Wilson 2002). Arizona’s subsequent corporate tax credit programs (2006 and 2009) are only accessible to low-income students, those with disabilities, and those in foster care (Melendez 2009).
 - *Florida.* Florida’s corporate tax credit program is available only to students who

²³Florida’s public schools used to administer norm-referenced assessments alongside of criterion-referenced state assessments, which enabled comparability between district and private schools. The legislature de-funded this \$12 million expenditure during the economic crisis of 2008 (Matus 2008). Assessment comparability would minimize the burden on participating private schools and also enable accountability.

qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and who attended a public school in the year prior. As mentioned above, the program boosts the test scores of urban, low-income students who leave public schools and also of those who remain in them (D. N. Figlio and Hart 2010), (D. Figlio and Hart 2014).

Other factors besides income may be proxies for middle-class standing, such as academic achievement and parental interviews as conditions for admission to participating schools. If policymakers have the goal of disrupting the socioeconomic status quo, they should consider disallowing such practices except in the case of exam schools that exist within a larger universe of options (Finn and Hockett 2012). As mentioned above, Chile rectified the elements of its voucher program that had reinforced existing class structures. Sweden took note, and its per-capita funding mechanism specifically disallows receiving schools to select students on the basis of academic achievement. One analysis of outcomes found a positive effect on students in all sectors (Böhlmark and Lindahl 2012).

- *Support parents.* Numerous studies show that first-generation parents navigate choice unevenly (Jochim et al. 2014), (Jochim 2015), (Gross, DeArmond, and Denice 2015). According to the scholar of record on D.C.'s Opportunity Scholarship Program, although over time parents become quite sophisticated about education, in the beginning "...even books and guidelines are insufficient; 40% of adults in D.C. are functionally illiterate. They need people" (Stewart and Wolf 2014). It is important to acknowledge and prepare for the learning curve. Some European countries provide extensive information about the outcomes of various schools; others include parent advisors in local education offices (Bishop 2010), (Berner 2012). States may want to include funding for this role and/or to partner with philanthropies that support first-generation families navigate the choice environment. A good example is Families Empowered, currently in Houston and San Antonio ("Families Empowered: Services" 2016).
- *Enable high-quality private schools to scale up.* One final domain of school-choice legislation is seldom addressed by advocates and never (as of writing) by legislatures: does the enabling law encourage high-quality private schools to replicate and new private schools to open? In contrast to the charter-school legislative model, which is oriented towards the creation of strong schools, school-choice legislation has focused on providing a lifeboat for low-income students who are trapped in failing schools. Scholarship programs have thus unwittingly filled empty seats rather than encouraged new ones. Indiana, for instance, requires schools to have been accredited prior to receiving students – a significant barrier to entry. A remedy would be to enable a pre-accreditation period, with state monitoring in the interim. The cost of facilities is another barrier, which states might want to mediate by providing facilities funding for high-quality private schools to expand. This area is ripe for exploration and innovation.²⁴

²⁴ [The Drexel Fund](#) is the first national equivalent of a Charter School Growth Fund, seeking to support and scale-up successful private schools. Its internal audit of scholarship programs through the lens of innovation is the first such analysis of which the writer is aware. The Fund invests currently in Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

The Culture of Schooling: Changing the Frame?

Given the considerable activity around policies that expand public funding for private schools, it has become increasingly important to consider the potential academic, civic, and fiscal consequences of expanding access to diverse, non-public schools. At the same time, it may be helpful to highlight a deeper question that is cultural rather than political: is the framework in which we *make* education-policy decisions adequate or not? The structure of American public education assigns legitimacy to district-run schools alone; alternatives, including public charters, are forced to justify themselves against this cultural norm. It is in this context, and this spirit, that we debate the consequences of scholarship programs.

Yet the prerogative of the State in delivering education does not follow inherently from democratic principles. By far the more common model of democratic school-systems is pluralistic, in which the State funds and to various degrees regulates and holds accountable, but does not necessarily manage, a diverse variety of schools. There is no evidence that such models under-perform uniform school-systems, nor is it obvious that democratic theory supports one form of schooling over another.²⁵ As it is, the existence of charter schools and private-school scholarship programs are stretching our experience of “public schooling” well beyond the boundaries established by late-19th-century legislatures. In this moment, then, educational leaders would do well to assess the assumptions that rendered the district-school model compelling a hundred and twenty years ago, and to ask whether it remains so.

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²⁵ See the debate on what constitutes democratic education between, for instance, Amy Gutmann and William Galston (Gutmann 2001), (Galston 2002).

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